

**THREE HOURS OF DARKNESS IN MARK 15.33: A SIGN OF GOD'S
JUDGEMENT**

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DECLARATION

I, Thembo Jovinal affirm that this dissertation is the result of my own original research and work. It has not been previously submitted to any institution of higher learning for any academic award.

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APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation titled "Three hours of darkness in Mark 15:33: A sign of God's Judgment" by Thembo Jovinal has been conducted under my supervision and is hereby submitted to Bishop Tucker School of Divinity and Theology with my full approval.

Signature:

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nyende", with a horizontal line above it and a double underline below it.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The desire to know the meaning of the three hours of darkness during Jesus' crucifixion and death becomes unavoidable for most readers of the gospel according to St. Mark as it is mentioned in the events which occurred at the apex of Jesus' mission on earth thus; during His crucifixion and death. St. Mark briefly mentions the three hours of darkness in his narrative (Mark 15:33) but he does not go into details of what it means, leaving many questions and speculations for his readers.

This research paper is aimed at exploring the Biblical understanding and meaning of the three hours of darkness during Jesus' crucifixion and death mentioned in the gospel according to St. Mark (15:33) in light of other scriptures thus; what is revealed through prophets and the New Testament Epistles which I will look at as continue with the discussion.

It is evident that Jesus Christ was crucified during broad day light at nine (9:00 am) as people were witnessing. At this time mocking him was so intense being spearheaded by the chief priest and the scribes (Mark 15:31-32) however, at the sixth hour, we are introduced to an amazing and abrupt feature of the darkness which fell over the whole land until the ninth hour (Mark 15:33). This calls for many questions of what it meant. It is worth noting that at the 6th hour the sun would be very bright for that is how it normally ought to be when it is over head but to the surprise there was total darkness all over the earth. C.H. Spurgeon says, "This darkness was not occasioned by any of the natural causes which generally produce darkness. It was in the middle of the day, precisely at noon, that the darkness came. It could not have been caused by an eclipse, for, it being the time of the Passover, we know that the moon was just then at its full, at which period no such thing as an eclipse of the sun could possibly occur"¹. Therefore, it becomes clear to us that this was not just a usual thing but it had a meaning. Something meaning full was transpiring and it is that we are digging for in this essay.

¹C.H. SPURGEON (1915), THE THREE HOURS OF DARKNESS: Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit; Sermon #3471 page 1

In order for us to arrive at a clear understanding of the meaning of the three hours of darkness mentioned in Mark (15:33), we will first look at the meaning of the day of YHWH for in this, we are spelling the context of the issue, I will also discuss the features of the day of YHWH and their symbolism as they will help to enhance our knowledge of how the day of YHWH looks like, the visible and invisible features that happens or are to happen on the day of YHWH and their symbolism which will help us to realize their implication, and finally we will be able to expose what the three hours of darkness mentioned in Mark 15:33 really meant.

2. MEANING OF DAY OF YHWH

It is very important for us to know and understand the meaning of “the Day of YHWH” for this will contribute to achieving the aim of this research paper. The Day of YHWH refers to a moment in time when God dramatically intervenes in human affairs, bringing both judgment and redemption. The time when God reveals His sovereignty over human powers and human existence². It may also be understood as any specific period of time in which the God of Israel intervenes in human affairs to save and judge³. In other words, it was a day when YHWH would wage on his enemy (or enemies) in judgement, thus destroying it (or them) and in consequence manifesting his Kingship⁴. It is worth noting that different expressions have been used to refer to the day of YHWH. So for example, “the Day of the LORD” (Zeph. 1:7), “the Day of vengeance” (Isaiah 61:2), “the Day of the LORD’S anger” (Lamentation 2:22), “finally, the Day of His fierce” (Lamentation 1:12). This day is not simply a date on the calendar but a theological statement about God’s rule over history and His intent to set all things right⁵. It is characterized by both terror and hope, darkness and light, depending on one’s relationship with God.

² Ultimate Bible Dictionary (2019) page 95

³ OLADOSU T. and ADEOTI, FATAI ABIODUN. (2023), The meaning and nature of the Day of the Lord in Malachi 4:1-4, page 106.

⁴ Peter Nyende. (2023), *The Restoration of God’s Dwelling and Kingdom* page 113

⁵ *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (1979) Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI. p. 230,

The phrase “the Day of YHWH appears 16 times in the Hebrew Bible thus; in Isa 13:6,9; Ezek. 13:5; Joel 1:15, 2:1,11, 3:4, 4:14; Amos 5:18(x2), 20; Obad. 1:15; Zeph. 1:7,14(x2); Mai. 3:23, and appears in any variation of this wording 15 times more: Isa 2:12, 13:13,34:8; Ezek. 7:19,30:3; Zeph. 1:8,18,2:2,3; Zech.14:1,7; Lam. 1:12, 2:1,21,22 making a total of 31 times⁶.The day of YHWH as described to be fall on Israel would be cataclysmic with YHWH’s cosmic epiphany particularly terrifying in a way that the earth would tremble or be shaken, the hills and mountains quake, and darkness would ensue. The sky would be black, sun, moon, and stars would not bear their light, and the moon would be turned to blood⁷.

I would like to look at Habakkuk 3.3-15, Zephaniah1.2-18; Amos 8:4-10,Joel 2:1-2, 10, 2Peter 3:10-13, and 1 Thessalonians 5:2 for they help to bring out clearly the meaning of the day of YHWH. The first text I look at to understand the Day of YHWH is Habakkuk 3.3-15. In this text, the Prophet puts it this way;

God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power. Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels. He stood and measured the earth; he looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered; the everlasting hills sank low. His were the everlasting ways. I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord? Was your anger against the rivers, or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses, on your chariot of salvation? [9] You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows.

You split the earth with rivers. The mountains saw you and writhed; the raging waters swept on; the deep gave forth its voice; it lifted its hands on high. The sun and moon stood still in their place at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear.You marched through the earth in fury; you

⁶OLADOSU T. and ADEOTI, FATAI ABIODUN. (2023), The meaning and nature of the Day of the Lord in Malachi 4:1-4, page 106

⁷Peter Nyende. (2023), *The Restoration of God’s Dwelling and Kingdom* page 113

threshed the nations in anger. You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck. You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret. You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty water (Habakkuk 3.3-15 ESV).

This in the first place describes a dramatic, almost cinematic vision of God coming in power to rescue His people and judge the wicked. vs 3-4, the text speaks of God's arrival described in majestic terms. The image is clear; God is not stuck in heaven. He is on the move, He comes from places like Teman a region in Edom, symbolizing God's southward coming, linked to Exodus imagery⁸ and Mount Paran a wilderness near Sinai, evoking God's covenant past². He shines with brightness and power, rays of light coming from His hands. The sentence builds gradually from the simple act of God coming to descriptions of His glory filling the heavens, increasing the intensity of the image⁹.

God comes in judgment; in vs 5-7, God's judgment is presented like a royal procession. Phrases like "pestilence went before Him", plague followed at his heels describes pestilence as a tool of God's judgment¹⁰, looked and shook the nations; the eternal mountains were scattered; the everlasting hills sank low; reveal to us that God's coming is not just about comfort but judgement and rescue. Even nature itself trembles thus; creation obeying Him explicitly, while man doesn't¹¹. Disease and chaos trail behind Him, and mighty nations crumble in His presence. Cushan and Midian nations from the ancient world panic as they witness God's power. So it is not a jock so to speak for even hills sank low and eternal mountains are scattered at His arrival, oh! how terrible is it to the wicked.

⁸Robertson (1990), page 245

⁹Andersen, Francis I. (2001), *Habakkuk: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, page. 316-318.

¹⁰Jenni, Ernst & Westerman, Claus. (1997), *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. page. 1138.

¹¹The Expositor's study Bible, (2005), page 1585

In this text we also have rhetorical questions which high light emphasis on God's moral judgment; in vs 8-10, the prophet asks questions like, "Was your anger against the rivers?" These are not seeking answers but emphasizing that God's wrath is not random natural fury but targeted against injustice. I would like to suggest that God is not angry with rivers or mountains but He uses them to display His might. Nature becomes His battlefield. The sun and moon stop in their tracks! It is very important to pay attention to this unnatural phenomenon as it is mentioned to accompany the day of YHWH in verse 11. In biblical thought, the celestial bodies thus; sun, moon, and stars, were not just natural elements but part of the created order, subject to God's command and they were markers of time and order (cf. Genesis 1:14), yet in prophetic vision, they could also be made to pause, darken, or fall in response to divine judgment or salvation¹². This symbolizes God's sovereignty over creation and creation's response as a means of communication indicating that God's wrath is being revealed ready to execute unstoppable judgment of the wicked.

This cosmic pause is not merely a miraculous event but it is a symbol of God's sovereign control over nature and time itself that when God is annoyed and ready to deal with his enemy, nature must be touched as an indicator that God's Judgement is taking place. Nature bows to moral and redemptive purposes in relationship with the will of God. The unnatural darkness is a moral symbol. humanity's sin has cast a shadow not only on society but on the cosmos as O. Palmer Robertson notes, 'this darkness signals the absence of divine favor and light is removed because God Himself is withdrawing his sustaining grace¹³' The very fabric of creation responds to His voice, bending to the will of the Creator. Thus, the stopping of the sun and moon is a symbol of divine intervention with anger that disrupts the natural order to achieve a higher moral good. It reminds us that in moments of crisis, the natural world is not indifferent but it is enlisted by God in the service of justice. The cosmos is not neutral; it bears witness to righteousness and responds to divine authority¹⁴.

¹²Gerhard von Rad.(1962) *Old Testament Theology, Volume I: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* page 147-148

¹³Robertson O. Palmer. (1990), *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* page 267.

¹⁴Terence E. Fretheim. (2005), *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* page 82-83.

Vs 12-15 presents God as a divine warrior. God is depicted as a warrior moving fiercely across the earth, crushing wicked foes. Strong action verbs like “crushed” and “pierced” emphasize His unstoppable justice. We see God taking down the wicked. The oppressors are confident, charging like a flood to destroy the innocent, but God turns their own weapons against them. Even the sea is no match for God as He treads its depths. The fact that enemies are destroyed by their own weapons adds a poetic justice dimension¹⁵. This helps us to really understand that the Day of YHWH is not a laughing matter so to speak but a day of God’s intervention in judgement of the unjust.

Let us look at what is revealed through prophet Zephaniah 1.2-18

“I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the Lord. “I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,” declares the Lord. “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the Lord and yet swear by Milcom, those who have turned back from following the Lord, who do not seek the Lord or inquire of him.” Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is near; the Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests. And on the day of the Lord’s sacrifice— “I will punish the officials and the king’s sons and all who array themselves in foreign attire.

On that day I will punish everyone who leaps over the threshold, and those who fill their master’s house with violence and fraud. “On that day,” declares the Lord, “a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, a loud crash from the hills. Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar! For all

¹⁵Collins, John J. (2018), *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, page. 414-415.

the traders are no more; all who weigh out silver are cut off. At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, 'The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill.' Their goods shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them." The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the Lord; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the Lord. In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth (Zephaniah 1.2-18 ESV).

The prophet in vs. 2-3, emphasizes destruction by repeating the phrase "I will sweep away," a Hebrew poetic device used to drive a point home. It is a dramatic announcement of judgment that seems to cover all of creation. In other words, It shows how total the judgment will be not just people but animals, idols, and even nature are affected¹⁶. The point is that sin affects everything, and God's justice is comprehensive, not selective. In verse 4-6 we see that after the broad announcement, the focus tightens to Judah and its capital, Jerusalem. God condemns idol worship (especially Baal), mixed religious practices, and outright neglect of Him. The phrase that "God will stretch His hand" is an expression used when God is about to do great things or inflict a notable punishment¹⁷. People were worshiping the stars

¹⁶Robertson, O. Palmer. (1990), *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*. page 261–262.

¹⁷The Expositor's study Bible, (2005), page1588

and mixing pagan rituals with the worship of the true God. The real issue here is unfaithfulness, and God calls it out.

Verses 7-13 continue to elaborate more on the “Day of the Lord,” highlighting how it is the time when God steps in to judge wrongdoing. Zephaniah paints it in sacrificial terms, almost like the people are about to be placed on the altar. The judgment is not random but targeted. Those who live as if God does not matter or won’t act are in for a rude awakening. Corrupt officials, dishonest merchants, and spiritually indifferent people are all on notice. God sees the hidden stuff and deals with it justly.

Verses 14-18 are laid out with intentional symmetry a literary structure called a chiasm and this helps to underline the theme of divine wrath by placing the most intense images of God’s judgment at the center of the passage¹⁸. Particularly we need to again look at how this prophet mentions the natural phenomena accompanying the day of YHWH in verse 15 this unnatural phenomena of the Day of YHWH sounds to be the reversal of creation for in Genesis 1, God brings light out of darkness and establishes order from chaos. But on the Day of YHWH, the process is reversed, light fades off and darkness and gloom falls on the earth not just slight darkness but with clouds and thick darkness, the skies tremble, the sea roars, and the stars fall as a symbol of God’s Judgment.

The terminology used echoes the language of de-creation, showing that sin not only affects human life but fractures the entire created order particularly when God responds to sin in Judgment. It is as though God is unmaking creation in response to humanity’s sin. However, this “cosmic collapse” is not random destruction but it is God’s righteous response to evil, aimed at restoring creation by purging it of corruption. As G. K. Beale writes, “The judgment imagery in the prophets serves a redemptive purpose. By deconstructing the current order, God prepares for its renewal¹⁹”. The mention of “clouds and thick darkness” evokes images of terrifying

¹⁸Barker, Kenneth L. (1985) *Zephaniah*. In *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7 page. 437-438.

¹⁹Beale G. K. (2011), *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* page 369

storms and celestial turmoil. This phrase often signals the presence of God in judgment, as seen in the theophany at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16-18). Yet here, it seems less about divine presence and more about divine wrath. These unnatural clouds don't nourish the land with rain they obscure, oppress, and terrify. The heavens, typically a source of light and life, have turned into darkness because of God's wrath. This also helps us to understand the meaning of the day of YHWH that it is a day of divine judgement symbolized in darkness which will leave the wicked in terror but also lead to salvation of God's people.

Let us look at what God speaks through prophet Amos.

Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, "When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat?" The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who dwells in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?" "And on that day," declares the Lord God, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day.

In Amos 8:4-10, YHWH condemns Israel's exploitation using deceitful weights, defrauding the needy, and dismissing sacred times and declares Judgement due to the evil done with in Israel. God through the prophet Amos, mentions that 'in that day' meaning the Day of YHWH which is the day of judgment, cosmic upheaval will occur thus; darkness at noon, trembling earth, turning their feasts into tragic mourning, signifying the depth and certainty of punishment²⁰."

²⁰Andrew E. Hill. (2015), *Amos*, in *The Gospel Coalition Commentary* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids), p. 108.

“And on that day,” declares the Lord God, “I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.” (Amos 8:9 ESV). The day referred to here is the day of YHWH the day when YHWH would judge Israel because of the evil they were doing like trampling on the needy and bringing the poor of the land to an end, making the ephah small and the shekel great and dealing deceitfully with false balances, buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat. For that matter therefore God declared Judgement thus “It will come about that day,” declared the Lord God, “That I will make the sun go down at noon and make the earth dark in broad day light (NASB). This will happen as a symbol of God’s Judgement.

There are three main clauses in verse 9 which we cannot leave without unpacking for they will help us to bring out clearly the unnatural phenomena the core feature in this essay and they are as follow;

“And on that day,” declares the Lord God; this introduces the prophetic utterance, marking a significant moment of divine intervention in judgement. The prophet makes it clear that it is not from his mind but from God. The day referred to is the day of YHWH when YHWH will execute judgement.

“I will make the sun go down at noon”; this clause describes an extraordinary event where the sun is caused to set at an unnatural time by the divine power. The sun will not just go down by its self but God through His mighty power will make it stop producing light because of His anger that results into judgement. “And darken the earth in broad daylight”; this reinforces the previous statement, emphasizing the unnatural darkness as a sign of divine response (Judgement) for a given reason (sin). Sin provokes God’s Judgement witnessed in failure of sun and moon to produce light thus resulting into total darkness. When we read the previous verses of this chapter (vs. 4-8) we realize the sins which Israel had committed and it is the reason why God is annoyed and therefore, responds to that wicked behavior by pronouncing judgment as

stated above. The judgement will be witnessed physically by making darkness to fall on the land.

This is what YHWH declares as what will happen on his day “the Day of “YHWH” when he will be dealing with the unfaithful Israel for their rebellious acts in the sight of the LORD. This reveals that His wrath is kindled and therefore God is seriously pronouncing his divine Judgment and punishment on the sinful humanity.

In fact, when we pay attention to the message of God through the prophets, we are made to understand that the Day of YHWH is that moment when God intervenes in human affairs in response to their way of behaving in terms of relating to Him.

More so, it is also important to look at the prophesy of Prophet Joel;

“Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound alarm on my holy mountain let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; surely it is near a day of darkness and gloom, A day of clouds and thick darkness. As the dawn is spread all over the mountains, so there is great and mighty people; there has never been anything like it, nor will there be again after it to the years of many generations.’ ‘Before them the earth quakes, the heavens tremble, the sun and the moon grow dark and the stars lose their brightness.”
(Joel 2:1-2, 10 ESV).

By reading these scriptures, you realize God’s terrible visitation to the wicked. The call to blow the trumpet, is not just for fun but a divine alarm and Sacred Summon to signal the arrival of disaster associated with divine judgment and confrontation of wickedness. The mention that let all the inhabitants of the land tremble reflects the presence or the visitation of a powerful God whose power causes the foundations of the earth and all that it contains to shake. It also signifies the impact of human sin even on creation as we see the prophet mentioning the arrival of darkness and gloom not only that but the darkness is think implying that it a serious issue. The light giving features will fail to produce light in response to divine power as he executes judgement. God can never leave sin unpunished. He reveals how horrible the day for

his response to wickedness will be through the words of Prophets as we have seen above. I would like to mention that Sin provokes God's anger for not only it is understood as disobedience but also a rebellion against Him and definitely His wrath revealed to deal with the rebellious and this is witnessed as darkness falls on the ground.

Not only is the day of YHWH in the Old Testament but also it is reflected in the New Testament. Let us have a look at how it is reflected there by looking at 2Peter 3:10-13.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Peter 3:10-13 ESV).

Here Peter gives us another description of the Day of YHWH mentioning its other nature as that which will come suddenly and unexpectedly when everything will be laid bare before God. This sentence highlights the unexpected and sudden nature of the Day of YHWH. Peter emphasizes that this day will arrive like a thief quietly and without warning. According to him, the heavens, which seem so permanent, will pass away with a loud sound, and the elements, the very building blocks of creation, will melt with intense heat. This paints a picture not of gradual change, but of total transformation. It means the corrupted will be destroyed such that new heaven and a new earth, are made where justice and righteousness will finally be at home. The urgency of that day is also mentioned and emphasized by St. Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians; "For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (1 Thessalonians 5:2 ESV).

Sincerely speaking, the day of YHWH becomes, clear to us as that day when God of power intervenes to execute divine judgement and rescue His people. The day is characterized to be recognized by the whole universe for even all creation tremble at the arrival of YHWH, to come suddenly like a thief, it is also the day when the wicked are to face the wrath of God. It is disaster or a red- letter day so to speak for those who are unjust or wicked.

3. FEATURES OF THE DAY OF YHWH AND THEIR SYMBOLISM

In the previous section we have discussed the meaning of the day of YHWH. However, in this section, I would like to discuss features of the Day of YHWH and their symbolism as these will also help to paint a clear picture and make us understand what the Day of YHWH is, what it means and what really is to happen on that day.

The first feature I want to look at is darkness; this is a feature that describe the Day of YHWH a day not of celebration but of divine reckoning. Darkness here is more than physical absence of light. It carries heavy spiritual and moral symbolism, often representing chaos, disorientation, and the withdrawal of God's presence. In other words, Darkness is not just absence, but a collapse of order and life as it was intended. Joel 2:2 calls it "*a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness*", evoking the feeling of an impending storm. Amos 5:18-20 delivers a harsh critique of those who long for that day, saying it will not be light but utter darkness, "*with no brightness in it.*". Zephaniah 1:15 echoes this with a dramatic portrayal: "*That day is a day of wrath... a day of darkness and gloom.*" Together, these verses paint a picture that darkness is reversed creation's light, return to the primordial chaos, and leave humanity morally and spiritually disoriented. Brueggemann says "the prophets speak of the Day of YHWH as a moment when even light the symbol of God's order is stripped away²¹."

Darkness also symbolizes the people's inability to perceive truth. When they ignore God's word, darkness becomes a fitting judgment. It speaks to a loss of moral clarity, where people walk blindly into destruction because they refused correction. Barton

²¹Walter Brueggemann. (2001), *The Prophetic Imagination* page 55.

emphasizes that Joel's depiction of darkness conveys the awe and terror of divine presence, especially when human hearts have turned cold²².

The second feature I look at is fire and burning; Throughout the Bible, fire represents far more than just physical destruction. It reflects the intensity of God's response to sin, His desire for purity among His people, and sometimes even His intention to renew what has been corrupted. In the prophetic imagination, fire speaks loudly about the seriousness of divine justice and the hope that lies on the other side of cleansing. For example, Malachi 4:1, the prophet describes a coming day that "*will burn like a furnace,*" where the arrogant and wicked will be reduced to ashes like dry straw. Joel 2:3 portrays the LORD's judgment as an advancing force: "*Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes.* Zephaniah 1:18 emphasizes how "*the whole earth will be consumed by the fire of His jealousy.*" And in Isaiah 66:15-16, God comes with fire and fury, rendering judgment with flames and sword alike. In fact, these dramatic portrayals are not meant to be merely terrifying. They draw from earlier biblical traditions where fire often marked God's holy presence like the burning bush in Exodus 3:2 or the fire on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:18²³.

However, here in the context of the Day of YHWH, this fire points directly to God's wrath against evil, His demand for holiness, and His ultimate authority over creation. R. E. Clements says that Malachi's image of fire is not just dramatic it presents a moral line in the sand, where those who continue in evil cannot survive the presence of a just God²⁴. Nevertheless, fire just destroys but also it refines. For example, God is portrayed not as a wildfire, but as a refiner carefully tending silver in the fire, "*He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver... and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like Gold and silver....*" (Malachi 3:2-3) This refining process is painful, yes, but it is intended to restore and sanctify, not annihilate²⁵. In other words, this suggests that God's judgment is surgical, especially for those in leadership or

²²John Barton, *Joel and Obadiah: (2001), A Commentary* page. 79.

²³John Barton, *Joel and Obadiah: (2001), A Commentary* page. 79

²⁴R. E. Clements. (1978), *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach*, page 141.

²⁵Ellen F. Davis. (2001), *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, page 85.

covenant roles, and that fire is as much about transformation as it is about punishment as Ellen F. Davis, puts it that the fire in Malachi 3 is not a generalized apocalypse; it is a form of divine discipline aimed at bringing about renewal through purification²⁶. More so, fire symbolizes jealous love and covenant accountability. Christopher Wright argues that in the prophets, fire often expresses God's desire to reclaim His people, not just to punish them²⁷. The fire, then, is not cold or impersonal; it is fueled by relational passion. God responds with fire not just to sin, but to betrayal of relationship²⁸.

The third feature I look at is earthquake; "*He stood and shook the earth; he looked and made the nations tremble.*" (Habakkuk 3:6). One of the most awe inspiring images in the biblical description of the Day of YHWH is the shaking of the earth and heavens. In fact, earthquakes, trembling skies, and cosmic signs are not just natural disasters in these scriptures, they serve a much deeper symbolic and theological function for example, they reveal that God is not only acting in human history, but is also reordering the entire creation in response to human sin, covenant violations, and divine purposes.

In ancient Israelite thinking, earthquakes were often linked to the ophanies visible or tangible manifestations of God. When God appears, even the foundations of the world are shaken. This is consistent with Mount Sinai imagery, where the mountain quaked as God descended in fire (Exodus 19:18). These tremors reflect the reality that God's presence disrupts the ordinary. He enters history not quietly, but in ways that shake everything secure²⁹. As John Goldingay observes, the shaking of creation in prophetic texts conveys a sense that God is not bound by the natural order, He breaks in to confront sin and demand transformation³⁰.

In addition, when Prophets Joel and Isaiah describe not just the earth but the sun, moon, and stars going dark or trembling, they signal more than atmospheric change.

²⁶Ellen F. Davis. (2001), *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, page 85

²⁷Christopher J. H. Wright. (2014), *The Message of Jeremiah*, page 273.

²⁸Christopher J. H. Wright. (2014), *The Message of Jeremiah*, page 273.

²⁹John Goldingay. (2014), *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*, page 123.

³⁰John Goldingay. (2014), *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*, page 123.

These heavenly bodies often symbolized political powers (kings, empires) or the order of society itself. Their shaking represents the undoing of unjust structures and the collapse of human pride³¹. Walter Brueggemann interprets these disturbances as a symbolic dismantling of unjust regimes, where God deconstructs the current order to make way for something new³². The trembling of the earth is not only about divine power but it also reflects the impact of human sin on creation itself.

According to the prophetic worldview, when humans violate God's covenant, the land mourns (Hosea 4:3), the earth trembles, and creation becomes unstable and these cosmic shifts are part of the covenant consequences, a physical echo of spiritual disorder as Ellen Davis notes that in prophetic literature, creation itself becomes a participant in the covenant, responding to the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of God's people³³. In other words, these feature not is merely frightening it declares that God is remaking the world. Just as He once created by bringing order out of chaos, so He now prepares to renew by disrupting corrupted order.

Another feature is the trumpet blast; "*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill! Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming.*" (Joel 2:1); Here, the trumpet is a warning that divine judgment is not only imminent but it is already approaching. It also symbolizes the presence of God or that God is just near. Historically, the shofar was blown at Mount Sinai when God descended upon the mountain (Exodus 19:16). Its blast signaled divine presence, invoking awe and trembling³⁴. That same reverence is echoed in the prophets. On the Day of YHWH, the trumpet becomes a liturgical cue not of worship in the temple, but of God's arrival to judge.

Zephaniah 1:16 describes "*a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities.*" The trumpet is associated with both military invasion and divine wrath, blurring the lines between human conflict and heavenly purpose. Throughout the

³¹Walter Brueggemann. (2001), *The Prophetic Imagination*, page 89-90.

³²Walter Brueggemann. (2001), *The Prophetic Imagination*, page 90

³³Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture* page 94

³⁴Tremper Longman III. (2006), *The Minor Prophets: An Introduction*, page 132.

Bible, the trumpet (Hebrew: *shofar*) is a deeply symbolic and multi-functional instrument³⁵. It served to announce sacred festivals, alert people to danger, and most importantly in prophetic texts, to signal the arrival of divine judgment. On the Day of YHWH, the sound of the trumpet is not just a warning but it is the very voice of disruption, a call to awareness, repentance, and spiritual readiness³⁶. It breaks through the noise of ordinary life and declares that God is near, and nothing will stay the same.

In addition, the trumpet works as an alarm of impending judgment. The trumpet sounds like an alarm before disaster. It does not cause the destruction but announces its arrival. This mirrors ancient Near Eastern practices, where trumpets were blown to mobilize troops or warn cities of incoming attack³⁷. In the prophetic imagination, the Day of YHWH is likened to such a siege, only this time, the invader is not a nation, but God Himself³⁸. The trumpet also remains a symbol of both divine announcement and apocalyptic intervention, spanning from the prophets to the final pages of Scripture. Richard Bauckham explains that the trumpets in Revelation build on the Old Testament pattern, functioning as sounding judgments that offer final opportunities for repentance³⁹.

Lastly I look at wailing and mourning; according to Prophet Amos (Amos 8:10), God declares: *“I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation... I will make it like the mourning for an only son.”* The depth of grief evoked here is intense comparable to losing one’s only child. Prophet Joel 1:13 calls on priests to mourn: *“Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar.”* The prophetic call to mourn often symbolizes acknowledging sin. When priests are told to wear sackcloth and wail (Joel 1:13), it’s not just for the ruined harvest and it is a sign of national repentance. The outward

³⁵C. L. Seow. (1998), *Joel, Jonah, and Micah: A Commentary*, page 52.

³⁶C. L. Seow. (1998), *Joel, Jonah, and Micah: A Commentary*, page 52.

³⁷John Barton (1996), *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, page 92-93.

³⁸John Barton (1996), *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, page 93.

³⁹Richard Bauckham. (1993), *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, page. 63-64.

signs of grief thus; sackcloth, ashes and loud cries are meant to reflect an inner turning back to God⁴⁰.

4. DARKNESS AT JESUS' CRUCIFIXION

In the previous section, we have realized that darkness symbolizes among others withdrawal of God's presence, judgment and punishment of sin. In other words, darkness is undoubtedly a feature of the arrival of the day of YHWH which is characterized by the wrath of God being revealed, bringing judgement and salvation. Therefore, at the end of Jesus's mission on earth, it is inevitable that he had to face this Day of YHWH for He carried the sins of the whole world on the cross and that is why he was subjected to God's Judgment and punishment. For example, it is written, *"And He Himself bore our sins in His body, on the cross so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed."* (1Peter 2:24). At this time, He was a sinner and there for deserved God's divine judgment and punishment. Let us look at this scripture, Mark 15:33;

"When the sixth hour came, darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour." (NASB).

This sentence consists of two main clauses thus;

"When the sixth hour came" This shows a time reference that marks a significant moment in the narrative of Jesus's crucifixion. In the Jewish time system, the "sixth hour" corresponds to noon⁴¹ (12:00 pm).

"Darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour." This clause describes the phenomenon of "σκοτος" which means to cause to be dark, darken⁴² this is used synonymously with "σκοτια" which imply a state of being devoid of light, darkness, gloom⁴³. Indicating a sudden supernatural event. Covering the whole land from the sixth to the ninth hour (12:00 pm - 3:00 pm). Over the whole land, which could mean the entire region of Judea or possibly beyond.

⁴⁰ Abraham Joshua. (1962), *The Prophets*, page 85–86

⁴¹ African Bible commentary, (2006) page 2638

⁴² Fredrick William Danker. (2021) A Greek- English Lexicon of the New Testament page 828

⁴³ Fredrick William Danker. (2021) A Greek- English Lexicon of the New Testament page 828

“Σκοτία” was also used in the Bible as the state of spiritual or moral darkness, state of being godless (Matt. 4:6, Isaiah 9:1-2)⁴⁴, suffering, lack of knowledge⁴⁵, darkness often symbolizes judgment or divine intervention (Exodus 10:22, Amos 8:9). Craig S. Keener notes that, “darkness at midday was understood in Jewish thought as a sign of divine displeasure⁴⁶.”

At this point I can say, that darkness covered the land as a symbol of experiencing divine displeasure, in connection to the terrible day of YHWH which had been set to crush the wicked as it has been also described in Old Testament scriptures above, while Judgment and punishment were taking place. For sure, Jesus is receiving the full wrath and punishment from God the Father because He is bearing our sin and actually becoming our sin, yes and Amen, and without a doubt⁴⁷. Warren says, “The darkness at Calvary was an announcement that God’s Firstborn and Beloved Son, the Lamb of God, was giving His life for the sins of the world. It was also an announcement that judgment was coming and men had better be prepared⁴⁸.”

More so, the events that followed this event of darkness can help to shed more light for us to understand what was happening and to highlight the meaning of the three hours of darkness.

To begin with is Jesus’ cry to God for forsaking him. The bystanders taking it that he is calling out for Elijah. The feeling of desertion bringing agony to him for He carried the sins of the whole world as a sacrificial lamb as I earlier mentioned. It is worth noting that mourning was also mentioned among the features of the Day of YHWH meaning that really Jesus was experiencing the Day of YHWH. At that point he was a sinner, evil, wicked, rebellious, disobedient, impure, unclean, a transgressor, lawless, unrighteous, immoral to mention but a few, God would have no part with Jesus at that point⁴⁹. St. Mark puts it clear this way;

⁴⁴Tremper and Mark L. Strauss (2023) The Baker expository dictionary of the Bible words, page 205

⁴⁵Tremper and Mark L. Strauss (2023) The Baker expository dictionary of the Bible words, page 205

⁴⁶Craig S. Keener. (2014), The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament page 262

⁴⁷Joby Martin with Charles Martin (2022), IF THE TOMB IS EMPTY: Why resurrection means anything is possible page 193

⁴⁸Warren W. Wiersbe (2007), the wiersbe Bible commentary: New Testament page 133

⁴⁹Prof. Peter Nyende, BTSDDT, UCU, Sept 2023; *Lecture Notes* Topic 9 page 3

“At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?” Which is translated, ‘MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?’” (Mark 15:34). This cry shows the horror that Jesus was passing through for his father abandoning him. This abandonment and despair resulted from the out pouring of the wrath of His father on Him as a sin-bearer for His eyes are too pure to approve evil, And He cannot look at wickedness with favor. (Habakkuk 1:13). John Courson says, “Leprosy didn’t intimidate Him; storms didn’t frighten Him, armies didn’t faze Him. The only thing that terrified our Lord was being out of fellowship with his father⁵⁰. To put it another way is to say that the intimacy between the Son and the Father was no more at that moment this also tells us that really the Day of YHWH had fallen on Him given the darkness which covered the earth for three hours.

Additionally, is, Jesus’ loudly cry giving up his spirit at which point the temple veil torn apart. St. Matthews puts it this way, *“And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split.”* (Matt. 27:50-51). I want to suggest that it was a voluntary act of His will in giving Himself to his father. He handed His spirit to the care of the Father. (I Peter 2:23). In other words, His heart did not slowly quit beating but He gave His life away. This imply that His death was miraculous in a way that He was in charge of it all. Wilmington says, “His mission of atonement had been completed. Finally, He could allow His body to die. With one last surge of strength, He once again pressed His torn feet against the nail, straightened His legs, took a deeper breath, and uttered His seventh and last cry, “Father, into thy hands I commit My Spirit⁵¹.” This helps us to understand that the atonement work was done meaning that the transactions of the Day of YHWH as prescribed earlier were done.

Furthermore, the splitting of the temple curtain meant that access to God was now effected by the death of his Son. Sin, the greatest stumbling block to God, had been

⁵⁰John courson (2003), John Courson’s application Commentary: New Testament. page 287

⁵¹Wilmington, Harold (2018), The crucifixion of Jesus (part 2) page 8

atoned for⁵². The entry to God's kingdom had now been provided. The tearing of the veil cannot be taken as an act of nature, or disaster of strong wind or earthquake. I may be correct if I say it was the hand of God opening the veil of access to His presence now that the final sacrifice for sin by Christ had been offered. The curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple⁵³. It was made of fine wool, several inches thick⁵⁴. Its tearing signaled the opening of the way to God through Jesus, and the rejection of the old system of priests and sacrifices that had dominated the temple and its activities⁵⁵. The scriptures say, *"And not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, he entered the Holy place once for all having obtained eternal redemption."* (Hebrews 9:12). *"For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."* (1Timothy 2:5) The centurion who witnessed these events confessed that Jesus was indeed the Son of God unlike those who earlier wanted to stone Him for claiming to be the Son of God. These events that followed the event of darkness also help us to understand the reality and significance of the three hours of darkness during Jesus' crucifixion. This gives me the courage to mention it that the three hours of darkness symbolizes the arrival of the Day of YHWH on Jesus Christ which was characterized by revealing of God's wrath, judgment and punishment of sin on Jesus Christ.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, the three hours of darkness during Jesus' crucifixion symbolizes the day of YHWH characterized by a great pour of God's divine wrath, judgment and punishment of sin which also happened to Jesus Christ who had carried all the sins of the whole world on the cross as the climax of his mission on earth. Sincerely speaking, it was an indicator of the arrival of the day of YHWH which was meant for judgement of the wicked because the features mentioned (darkness and others as we have seen) are really those of the day of YHWH following the way

⁵²Prof. Peter Nyende, BTSDT, UCU, Sept 2023; *Lecture Notes* Topic 9 page 3

⁵³African Bible commentary (2006) page 2571

⁵⁴Joby Martin with Charles Martin (2022), *IF THE TOMB IS EMPTY: Why resurrection means anything is possible* page 201

⁵⁵African Bible commentary (2006) page 2571

how the day of YHWH is described in both Old and New Testament scriptures. Texts such as Habakkuk 3.3-15, Zephaniah 1.1-18, 2.1-3, Joel 2.1-2, 1Thess 5.2 and 2 Peter 2.10-13, give us a clear picture of the day of YHWH highlighting features like, darkness and gloom, earthquakes and cosmic disturbance, trumpet blast, fire and burning, Wailing and Mourning and many others which announce divine presence, the wrath of God and Judgement.

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